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The river in a landscape of creative practice: Creative River Journeys.

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Figure 1: *Hampstead Heath* [Wikipedia.]

Recently, whilst rambling on Hampstead Heath in north-west London with my cousin and talking about the socio-cultural history of that great city, Lou took me to a memorial drinking fountain fed by a well-spring bubbling up from a hillside on the Heath (Chowdry). “This is all that remains of The Mighty Fleet”, she said, “And the ponds, of course.”

The ponds she was referring to are a series of non-natural ponds that chain downwards along the Highgate east boundary of Hampstead Heath, fed by the Fleet River. These ponds were formed in the late 17th century to provide at first a drinking water source for the nearby populated areas of Highgate and St Pancras, then later in the 18th century, the ponds functioned as recreational areas for swimming and toy boating (London_geezer). Yet more ponds were formed in the 18th century on the south-west boundary where one of the tributaries of the Fleet River, Hampstead Brook, was dammed to provide another water source for the water-hungry, growing London populace. I had swum in one of these ponds, “the Kenwood Ladies Bathing Pond”, only a few days before my ramble with Lou when London was surprised by an unseasonal April heatwave. That public bath, for ladies only, is a picturesque large, deep pond surrounded by picket-fenced grassy areas, and patrolled by a fierce lifeguard who drilled me about my swimming ability. “I’m Australian. We all know

how to swim,” I replied with some license. I shared the icy, downy water of the River Fleet with the swans and the ducks and a mere handful of knowing, brave Londoners.

Lou’s comments about the Fleet River, and the fact that she lived on Fleet Road, made me curious. The Fleet had once been a mighty river and centuries ago had carried boats down to the Thames: how could it be completely lost? And of course, the truth is, it is not lost. The Fleet River continues to flow, its might depleted to a creekly trickle, from Hampstead where it rises beneath the Heath reaching ground-level in ponds and small trickling brooks, then running beneath Fleet Road, NW3, into London’s labyrinthine underground sewerage system before finally coming above ground again to meet the Thames beneath Blackfriars Bridge, London city. The famous London thoroughfare, Fleet Street, was once called Fleet Bridge Street and takes its name from this river that it once traversed. I know this thanks to one very diligent blogger and cultural historian, London_geezer, who has walked the entire course of the Fleet River, high streets and all.

When it flourished, The Fleet River served as a shipping thoroughfare, as the fabled battleground between Boudicca’s army and the Romans, and also as a dependable water supply to all those who lived along the river’s course. By the 17th century, as London became a much more densely populated city, The Fleet became known as the Fleet Ditch due to it having been so dammed that its water load was much reduced, and it became highly polluted. Initially, it was at first canaled (see figure 2 below), then built over. But the water did not simply stop its much-reduced course downhill to the Thames and it runs to this day as one of London’s many subterranean rivers. In fact, the Environment Agency of London has recently initiated an ambitious project to reinstate some of these lost subterranean rivers of London, including The Fleet River (Jowett).



Figure 2: Entrance to the Fleet River, Samuel Scott, c. 1750. (BBC)

So why did The Fleet River so interest me and lead me off into an inquiry concerning the socio-cultural history of a forgotten London river? Having been immersed in a research project using the river as a metaphor for artist-researchers' creative practice, it struck me that the course of the Fleet, over history and beneath London, also is a metaphor for the creative process. The weaving above ground and below ground of the watercourse is not unlike an image of creativity proposed by Koestler:

The moment of truth, the sudden emergence of a new insight is an act of intuition. Such intuitions give the appearance of miraculous short-circuits of reasoning. In fact, they may be likened to an immense chain of which only the beginning and the end are visible above the surface of consciousness. The diver vanishes at one end of the chain and comes up at the other end, guided by invisible links. (Koestler 211)

The River Fleet's chain of ponds and subterranean waterways, and the process by which it vanishes in Hampstead and reappears at the Thames, is akin to Koestler's diver negotiating a complex waterway by virtue of a chain of invisible links and submerged creativity.

Creative practitioners are familiar with periods of incubation and submersion in the creative process. One academic supervisor for my masters of creative writing degree very kindly referred to my long periods of non-writing and rumination as "filling the creative well". Even today, I have heard these periods of immersion, when one lets the analytical go underground, referred to as "swimming amongst the ideas" and "going with the creative flow". Water, water everywhere.

Csikszentmihalyi calls into play just such water imagery when he theorises about creativity and happiness. His study of the happiness of a broad stretch of people including sportspeople, scientists, artists, and every-day workers identified optimal states of contentment which he described as *flow*. In this study he defined flow as a state of human "optimal experience...the state in which people are so involved in an activity that nothing else seems to matter; the experience itself is so enjoyable that people will do it even at great cost, for the sheer sake of doing it". (*Flow: the Psychology of Happiness* 4) Artists may relate to this description of being immersed in a practice for its own sake, and with its own ends, and the utter sense of satisfaction one feels during that immersion. Many points along the course of a creative practice can be seen as states of flow.

In my current PhD study, *Creative River Journeys*, I use the metaphor of the river as a data capture tool when interviewing artist-researchers about their experiences of conducting creative practice within a university research context (Stevenson). What I am attempting to do in the *Creative River Journey* reflections is to document these states of flow with, and for, the artist-researchers concerned, with the aim of exploring these moments when optimal creative experience happens. This paper does not serve as a complete description of the complex methodological aspects of this PhD study. Rather, the aim of the paper is twofold: firstly, to explore the metaphorical connections between various notions of the river, for example, in creativity theory and in the study. Secondly, to give brief glimpses into the application of the *Creative River Journey* chart as a data capture

and reflective tool. More detailed discussion of methodology may be found in Stevenson & Girak, and the author's papers as referenced. The Creative River Journey data capture chart is depicted in Figure 3 below.

***Creative River Journey: A critical moment river journey
chart***

(adapted from Kerchener, 2006, p. 128)

***Name.....Date.....
Artwork/Performance/Text.....***



Figure 4: Creative River Journey data capture chart (Stevenson)

In individual semi-structured interviews, I ask each artist-researcher to describe in detail the key or critical moments, including decisions, experiences and processes, of producing one artwork or one contained aspect of practice. Through the interview, I document these experiences using the Creative River Journey chart, with each bend on the river representing one of these critical moments. This is a collaborative process with the chart placed between myself and the interviewee so that the interviewee is able to indicate on the chart when and where critical moments occurred as they describe them. At the end of the interview, the interviewee and I review the chart and changes are made to the chart according to interviewee's instructions, including highlighting parts of the art-making process I had not identified as critical moments (Stevenson & Girak).

The River Journey for data capture has been cultivated as a research tool through a series of adaptations. Burnard explains that her River Journey tool, which she calls "Rivers of

Musical Experience", has its roots in the field of psychology (*Using Critical Incident Charting for Reflecting Musical Learning* 7) but that it was later adapted by education researchers (Pope and Denicolo). Common to all the adaptations is the use of the River Journey to capture critical incidents or moments in a particular process, and this stems from the River Journey's original use as a clinical tool for "critical incident charting" in Personal Construct Psychology (Kelly, 1991/1955, cited in *Using Critical Incident Charting for Reflecting Musical Learning* 7). Burnard states:

As a tool for reflection, creating "Rivers of Musical Experience" encourages active involvement from participants in an emancipatory and democratic way. Like rivers, the words start to flow because the participants, either on their own or with the help of their tutor/teacher or researcher, draw them in ways that they own and feel appropriate. (8)

The River Journey tool was used initially by Burnard (*How Children Ascribe Meaning to Improvisation and Composition: rethinking pedagogy in music education*) in her 2000 study of children's musical experience, in which she interviewed children about the ways that their past experiences of music influenced their general musical interest at home and school. In this instance, each bend in the course of the River Journey reflected a critical moment when their experience of music shifted, changed or was influenced. Subsequently adapted by Kerchner as the "Music Education River Journey", and used with her pre-service music education students to "describe pivotal moments in their music history that ultimately led them to pursue a career in music education" (Kerchner 126), the approach was demonstrated to be both flexible and amenable to development.

Thus, I designed my study into the creative practice of artist-researchers conducting their art practice as part of a university postgraduate degree using the river journey chart, and called the chart in my study the Creative River Journey chart due to its application in this context. However, this research using Creative River Journeys focuses on more than single instances of flow or creative practice. Each creative practice under scrutiny is positioned within an artist's wider practice and within the context of the artist's higher education studies. A good way to understand the context for these artists is to consider Csikszentmihalyi's theorising about flow within his systems theory of creativity.

Drawing on this earlier metaphor of flow, Csikszentmihalyi propounds a theory about the experience and conditions of creativity (*Creativity: Flow and the Psychology of Discovery and Invention*). He does this based on a longitudinal study of the creative processes of a diverse group of people, once again including writers, artists, musicians and scientists, and interrogates their creative moments in terms of his notion of flow:

Scientists often describe the autotelic aspects of their work as the exhilaration that comes from the pursuit of truth and beauty. What they seem to describe, however, is the joy of discovery, of solving a problem, of being able to express an observed relationship in a simple and elegant form. So what is rewarding is not a mysterious or ineffable external goal but the activity of science itself. It is the pursuit that counts,

not the attainment. (*Creativity: Flow and the Psychology of Discovery and Invention* 122).

Csikszentmihalyi proposes that this pursuit of creativity takes place in a system that contains three key elements: the domain, which is the symbolic rules and procedures for a given creative practice; the field, made up of all the people and institutions who are involved in that domain, for example “in the visual arts the field consists of art teachers, curators of museums, collectors of art, critics...” (*Creativity: Flow and the Psychology of Discovery and Invention* 28); and the person, the individual creative practitioner who is part of the field and working in the domain of their choice. Csikszentmihalyi’s systems theory of creativity illustrates that the individual artist is part of a complex network of influences, controls and rules that impact upon their creative process.

The Creative River Journey PhD study has as its focus the person, in this case the artist-researcher, within that system of creativity, and in this study I aim to understand their individual creative process. However, in the Creative River Journeys documenting these artist-researchers’ practice, it is clear that the individuals are often engaged in very fluid and often subterranean processes within very complex and interconnected systems. I cannot artificially extract one individual instance of creative practice, as contained in one river journey reflection, and use that to exemplify an artist’s complete oeuvre. A more appropriate way to think of each instance of the Creative River Journey is as one part, or tributary, of a complex creative ‘river’ system, just as the River Fleet is part of a complex subterranean network of tributaries of the River Thames. This complexity of connections is well illustrated in the diagram below of a river system.

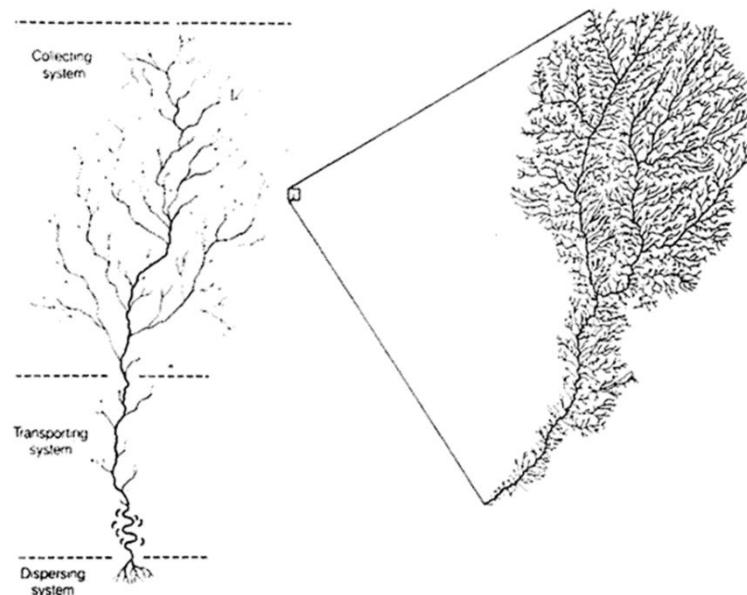


Figure 4: Diagram of a river system. (FAO, United Nations)

This positioning of one river within a complex network of interconnected rivers is used as the setting of the sci-fi film *Riverworld* (O'Connor & Gillard). In the film, human beings who die suddenly are reborn in a kind of afterlife on a planet called Riverworld. When they first arrive, each new reborn finds themselves immersed in a river which they must journey along and initially this seems to be their entire new world. However, the camera pulls out to give an omniscient view of Riverworld and the viewer, and soon the reborn, discovers that each river is part of a vast network of rivers and tributaries that cover the entire planet like a membrane.

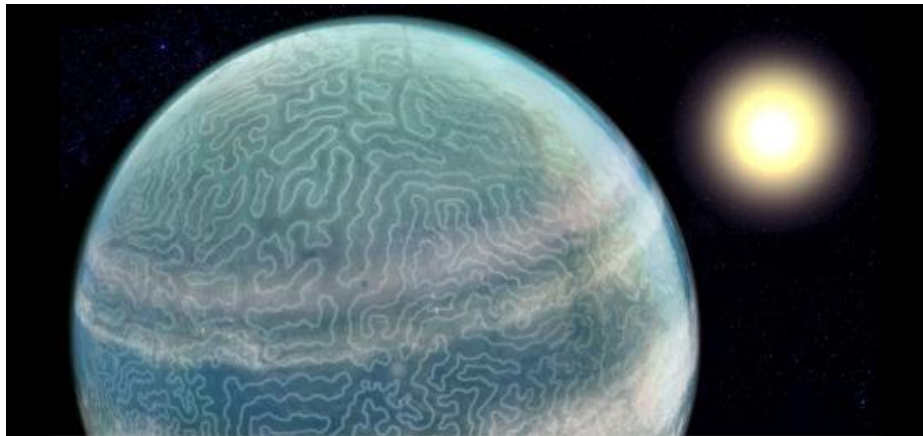


Figure 5: *Riverworld* image from Blstr.com syfy online network (Cairns)

I refer to the above *Riverworld* image as a further illustration of my framing of the Creative River Journey chart as illustrating a contained aspect of a person's art practice within a larger creative practice context. Whilst using the river journey as a motif or metaphor depicts this one aspect of practice in a very contained way, if we were to take a bird's eye view of that artist's life and practice, if we were zoom out our reflective camera as it were, we would see that the one aspect of practice illuminated in one Creative River Journey chart is also part of a complex, interconnected network of creative practice that makes up the artist's world. And we would also see that the artist's river journey connects with the creative worlds of other artists and individuals.

Nevertheless, the data capture chart does function successfully in the interview process as a tool with which to depict one aspect of an artist-researcher's practice. Each bend of the river depicts metaphorically the shifts and changes in an artist-researcher's creative process. Often the artist-researcher identified critical moments in their own turn of phrase. For example, in the Creative River Journey chart in Figure 6 below, the artist-researcher referred several times to "turning points" and "life-defining moments". This artist-researcher has since described in detail the positive outcomes of the reflective process of the Creative River Journey (Stevenson and Girak). However, in trying to depict the Creative River Journeys of the artist-researchers whom I interviewed in my PhD study, I realised that I needed to depict the river journeys in a more dynamic way, with particular attention to trying to depict the complexity of the one instance of the artist-researchers'

practice that was the subject of each interview within an overall system of that artist-researcher's practice.

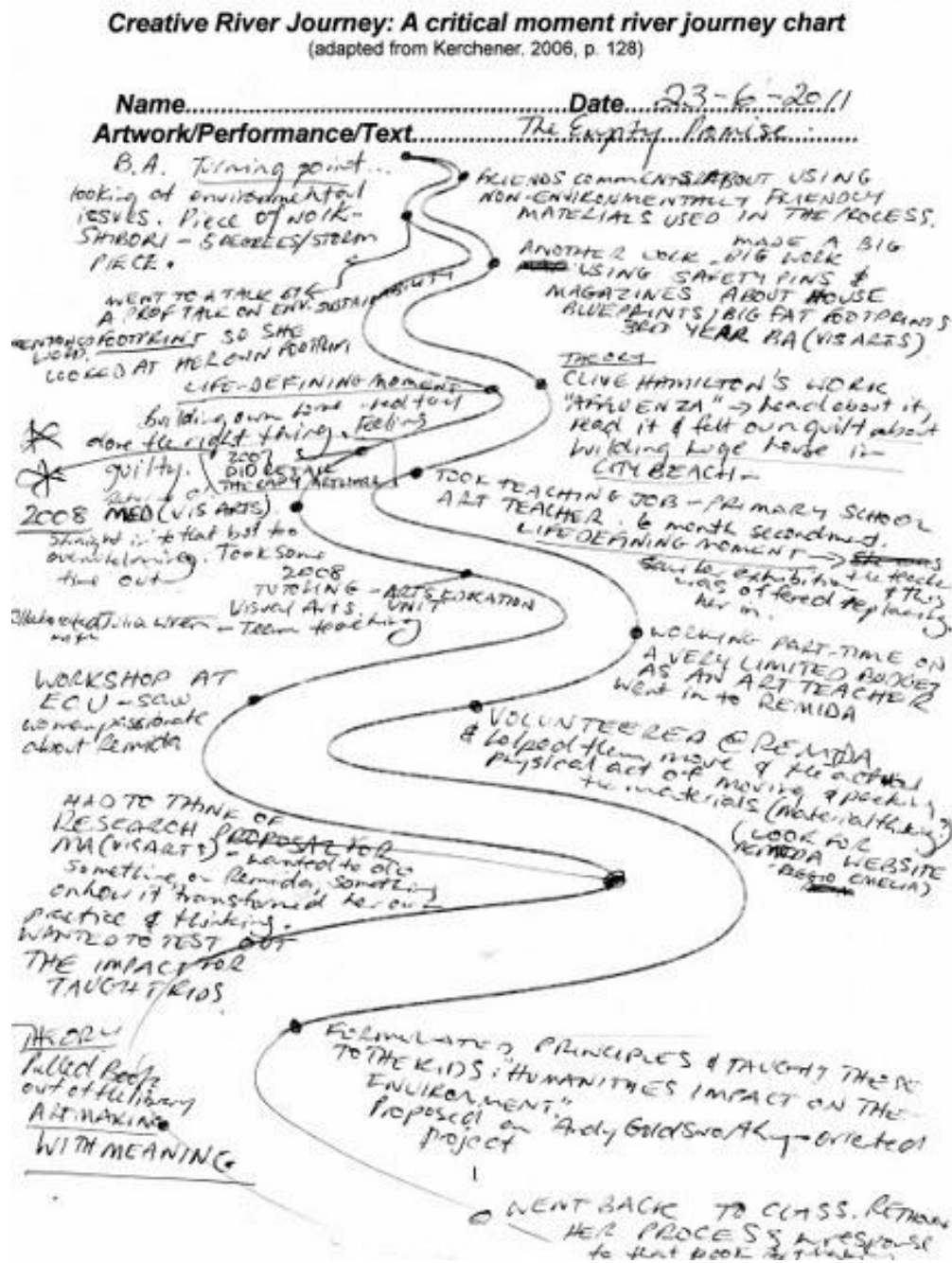


Figure 6: Creative River journey chart (Stevenson & Girak)

The opportunity to resolve this was presented in an Edith Cowan University interdisciplinary initiative that paired a PhD researcher with a design postgraduate. Working closely with the talented designer, Emma Loughridge, over a semester-long period of

creative collaboration, we arrived at the image of the river as depicted by Harold Fisk in his 1944 report on the iterations over time of the Mississippi River (Fisk). In Figure 7, you will see the original map that Harold Fisk made of the Mississippi River meander belt. Each colour on this map is an iteration of the river at a particular period in time, and we identified how this excellent depiction of a complex river system over time could serve as a metaphor for the iterations of creative practice over the time of an artist-researcher's creative practice.



Figure 7: Harold Fisk map of Mississippi River meander belt (Fisk)

In the next stage of the collaborative design, Emma Loughridge used her knowledge of design and I used my close analysis of the data collected via the Creative River Journey interview charts to co-construct an interactive diagram. This process of constructing the interactive diagram is currently in progress. However, in figure 8 below, you will see the prototype diagram whereby the data collected from an interview (see Figure 6) was transposed onto the template of the Harold Fisk maps, to create a more dynamic Creative River Journey chart. The intention is that the layering of the iterations of the Mississippi River in the Fisk map will itself serve as a metaphor for the complexity of an artist-researcher's practice, in particular, how that one instance of practice captured in one Creative River Journey chart sits within an artist-researcher's complex system of creative practice. This prototype diagram is illustrated in Figure 8 below.

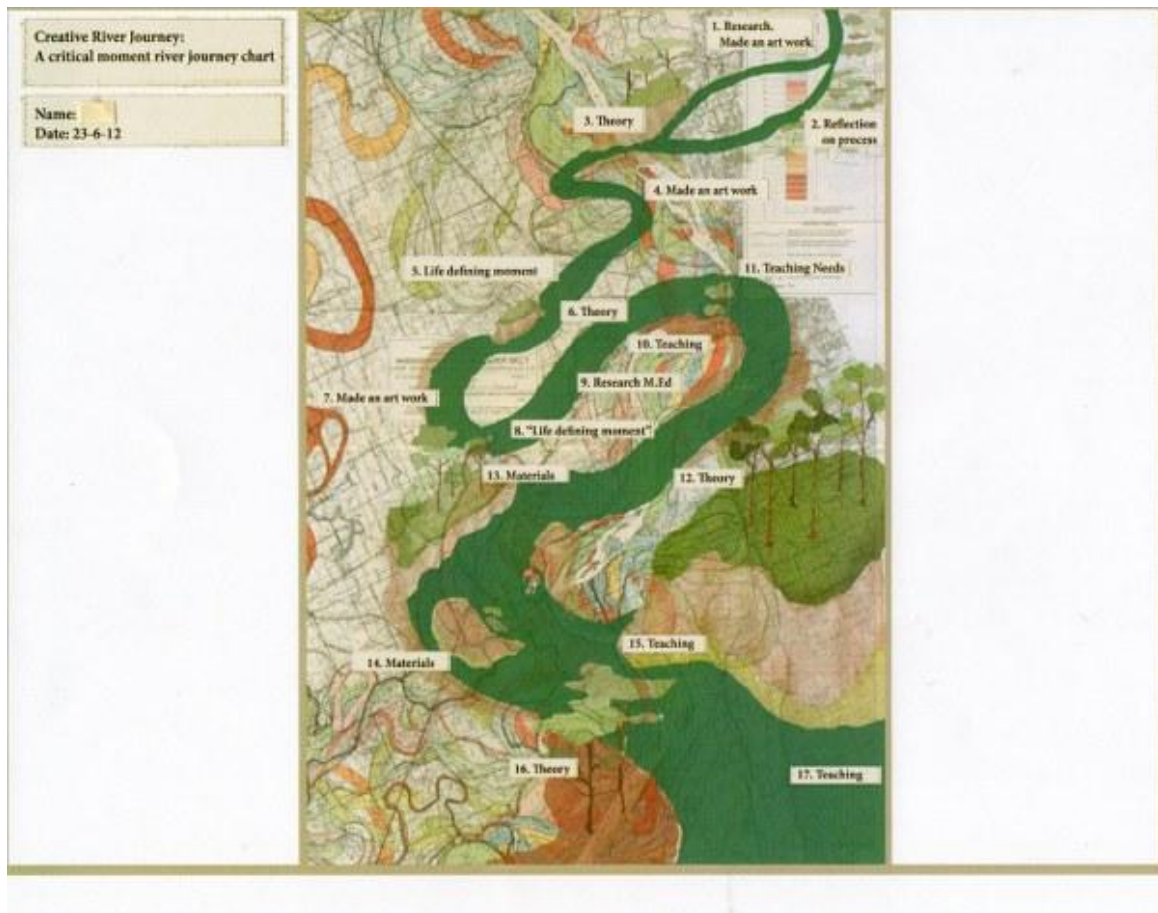


Figure 8: Interactive Creative River Journey Chart from ECU Visualising Research initiative

My use of the river as a metaphor for the creative journey, adapting the River journey tool from its use as a map of teacher identity and professional development, follows a long tradition of the river as a metaphor. For example, the river has been used in a narrative therapy approach with indigenous Australian men with substance dependency issues (Hegarty, Smith & Hammersley). In that case, the metaphor describes the shift from one state of substance abuse to a new state of well-being with that change being likened to a river crossing. The river metaphor has been used in teaching leadership theory to illustrate the forks and topography of the leadership journey (Burns) and it has been used as a metaphor for learning in educational psychology (Alexander, Schallert & Reynolds). This latter application of the river metaphor to a learning process has the closest similarity to the application of the river metaphor to the creative process. The authors state, when drawing upon the analogy of a river to consider the process of learning, that:

Just as one cannot begin to understand the true nature of a river system without understanding the continual interaction of all its elements at a time, and over time, one cannot begin to understand the nature of human learning without embracing its interactional complexity [...] Not only does the metaphor of the river system bring to light the concept of complex interactions as it relates to learning, but it allows us to

envision the dynamic nature of learning, which like the river system is in continual flux. (Alexander 176)

The use of river in relation to art practice has also been the subject of the film, *Andy Goldsworthy Rivers and Tides - Working with Time* (Donop, Davies, Hill & Riedelsheimer). In this film, Goldsworthy talks intimately of his art practice and the film depicts a series of his works, paying close attention to their development and installation. One of the pieces featured is a large sculptural work Goldsworthy made in the Storm King Sculpture Park in New York State, USA, called “Storm King Wall” in which he created a meandering drystone wall throughout the parkland leading through a forest and ending in a creek.



Figure 9: *Storm King Wall*, Andy Goldsworthy (Storm King Art Centre)

In describing his conceptualisation of this sculptural work, Goldsworthy alludes to an image of the world which resonates with that of the omniscient view of the aforementioned fictional planet Riverworld and Alexander et al's educational river journey:

At its best, the wall is a line that is in sympathy with the place through which it travels, and that sense of movement is very important in understanding the sculpture, all the movement of and passage of people, the movement of the wall - the river of stone as it runs round the trees, the river of growth that is the forest - and it has made me aware of that flow around the world, the veins that run round the world. (Donop et al)

In the film, Goldsworthy talks about the relationship of the river to his art and life and clearly states the importance of the river to his art practice: “There are two big influences in my work, the sea and the river”. He uses the river as a metaphor to describe a creative dynamic flow brought about through his engagement with nature. Goldsworthy attempts to define his imagining of the river, stating that, for him:

The river is a river of stone, a river of animals, a river of wind, a river of the water, the river of many things, the river is not dependent on water, we're talking about the flow, and the river of growth that flows through the trees and the land. (Donop et al)

The creative flow found in his engagement with the river operates as a kind of energy that informs and energises Goldsworthy's art practice:

Art for me is a form of nourishment. I need the land, I need it. I want to understand that state, the energy that I have in me that I also feel in the plants and in the landscape. The energy in life that is flowing through the landscape. It's that intangible thing that is here, then gone – growth, time, change, and the idea of flow in nature. (Donop et al)

Goldsworthy made another sculpture which he called "Stone River" for Stanford University of which he said:

I describe the form as a river and prefer it not to be referred to as a snake. It is not a river either, but in calling it one I hope to touch on the movement associated with a river. A river to me is not bound to water. It is the flow, not the water that is important— a river of wind, animals, birds, insects, people, seasons, climate, stone, earth, color. (Cantor Arts Centre)

Goldsworthy's discussion of the river and flow brings to mind the Csikszentmihalyi's *flow* theory of human creativity and happiness discussed earlier in this paper. Goldsworthy's discussion of his own practice throughout the film corresponds to Csikszentmihalyi's description of the state of flow: "Flow is the way people describe their state of mind when consciousness is harmoniously ordered, and they want to pursue whatever they are doing for its own sake" (*Flow: the Psychology of Happiness* 6).

The river also arose as the subject of an informal conversation between myself, the poet Andrew Taylor and the novelist Kim Scott. Following on from a poetry reading Taylor had done where he'd mentioned his love of river kayaking, he described a secret place on the river, a billabong off the Swan River in Perth, Western Australia, where he likes to glide in quietly to watch the birds. He refused to reveal the location because of its meaningfulness to him, an untouched treasure. Taylor said kayaking on the Swan River is where he feels most close to nature and he recounted with bright enthusiasm a moment when two river dolphins put on a spectacular performance just for him and his kayak. Scott talked of how he had borrowed a kayak and taken it down to the river, and how much closer he too felt to the river and its creatures as a result. He said that it was as though he was right up close to it and all the layers between him and the river were removed.

One of Taylor's poems is, in fact, called 'Rivers', and in this poem he contrasts the human impulse for certainty, control and discovering the source of things, with the river's constant flow and dynamism:

The lake glitters in the morning/so smooth it's like a thought rehearsed/for centuries, polished as the hand of a holy statue./Rivers though/run always away, even where the plain/stretches around them to the edges/of sky, and a few isolated trees/fringing their banks try to hold them back,/they're still flowing downhill.

Rivers/make their escape, and if they lead/anywhere it's to the question/ "Where did I come from?" (Taylor 364)

In another collection of poetry, a collaborative work between the poets John Kinsella, Peter Porter, and Sean O'Brien, Kinsella discusses the choice of *Rivers* as the title and the river as the unifying concept of the collection, and how the river can represent the form of a poem:

Rivers is a book of movement, a book of cultural change: replacement, loss, growth, destruction, and discovery. Beginnings and ends. A way of speaking across cultures, across gaps in a culture. Language and the river. The relationship of the poem's form to a river. Three distinctly different takes – geographies – finding connections. It is the linking of three distinctly different voices in the picaresque of poetry. (Kinsella 11)

Here we see three poet's perspectives described as geographies and their poems as like rivers within the landscapes of each poet's art practice.

Poetry and rivers are not new bedfellows. Milne argues, as have others, that Coleridge's *Kubla Khan* is a metaphor for the creative process, in particular the first two stanzas:

The basic structural feature of Xanadu is its circularity, defined by the course of the Alph, "the sacred river" (line 3). Rising out of the "deep romantic chasm" (l.12) amid the turbulent but intermittent gushings of a "mighty fountain" (l.19) which is its source in the upper or visible region of Xanadu, the river flows "with a mazy motion/Through wood and dale" (ll. 25-26). There it descends "on tumult" (l.28) into what is called alternately a "sunless sea" (l.5) or a "lifeless ocean" (l.28), that is, into the lower, hidden regions of Xanadu. What I call the visible and hidden regions of Xanadu correspond to the conscious and unconscious realms of the mind. (Milne 19-20)

Here, I am reminded again of the course of the River Fleet and its subterranean course, of Koestler's description of the creative process with only its beginning and ends above ground, the rest an unconscious, submerged journey, and the mazy intricate web of rivers that form the planet Riverland in the film of the same name. This relationship of geographies, of river systems, to the creative process lies at the heart of application of the river journey metaphor to artist-researchers' creative processes in my own PhD project, *Creative River Journeys*.

This relationship has, not unsurprisingly, led to the river becoming the subject of my own creative practice, in particular, in poetry that I have written as part of a poetic inquiry method in the *Creative River Journey* PhD study. My overall methodological framework is a/r/tography in which the researcher engages in the research from three perspectives, as artist, as researcher, and as teacher/educator, (hence a/r/t). Within that framework, as

artist, I have chosen to respond through poetic inquiry. This has meant a challenge to my previous modes of writing, academic and prose and, following the advice of Faulkner on “research/poetry [...whereby] researcher poets should study poetic craft (2)”, in 2012, I completed a year-long advanced poetry writing course at the Peter Cowan Writers’ Centre, on the Joondalup campus of ECU. There, in monthly workshops led by established poets such as Andrew Taylor, Lucy Dougan and Marcella Polain, there was critical engagement with poetry which, combined with my engagement with research material in my study, progressed my poetry writing rapidly.

My use of poems in the study broadly follows Butler-Kisber’s two-fold conceptualisation of poetic inquiry as “found poetry”, when words from interview transcripts are shaped into poetic form, and as “generated poetry”, whereby the researcher’s own experiences and words are used as the basis for more autobiographical poems (Butler-Kisber 83). I will close this paper with two of my “generated” poems from the collection *Breath of the Sea* (PCWC 55-5) that resulted from the year-long course at Peter Cowan Writers’ Centre. These poems are illustrative of my engagement with the river as a metaphor and came about through my own reflections on experiences of various rivers throughout my life. The poems speak of my own creative journeys with rivers – the river that is both a reality and a metaphor in the landscape of my own and so many others’ creative practice.

POUND BEND

In these upper reaches
the Yarra is not yet brown,
just silvery points beneath the gift
of October sun.

Her squeals echo up the gully walls
like currawong
at lick of river water between tiny toes
that dip and point, dip and point.

Her child legs are milky and fat,
her bathers iridescent safety pink, frilled and fulsome,
startling against the khaki curtain
of river bank, rock, scrub, gum.

I hold her hand in mine, partner her,
as she spins and staggers on unsteady feet,
straining to leap forward into the flow,
even then, as now, dancing away from me.

CAMBRIDGE DREAMING

Walking the River Cam to Grantchester
we spill from village streets
onto a warm May meadow.
Blessed by the loose light
of this new place,
we keep apace with swans
punts cycles sun
as the river winds its way out of our dreams.

We laugh later that the other poet's name is Brooke
as you punt through reeds along a tributary
into wide dark Byron's Pool.
He swam naked here they say
with his wives his barefoot children,
this decadent Bohemian

the heroic forefather
of my Fremantle hippy friends.

At Newnham Naturist's Club
Mr Nut-Brown gives me his usual generous smile,
his wife's half-sarong and breasts
similarly autumn-hued and welcoming.
The children cartwheel across
impossibly green June lawn
surprised by grass to the water's edge,
raised like me with beach sand between their toes.

I slip into the downy Cam.
My swimming companion's flesh
startling snow beneath the green,
my chaste black swimsuit
somehow more shocking than all this skin.

On Grantchester Lane
my grandmother's house blessing,
hung in her Fremantle kitchen for an age,
comes to life.
A thatched cottage opens a blue door
onto road.
Hollyhocks bloom fat bumblebees.
The flinty church tower looms
like God, over all.
And I, born of a century of Antipodeans,
feel her English heart open in mine.

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